



THE drum roll

Volume 36

344th Regular Meeting
Number 3

November 3, 2017

Premier social club and political powerhouse

Friday, November 3, 2017, 7:30 p.m.

Arlington Heights Memorial Library
500 North Dunton Avenue, Arlington Heights, Illinois

The Grand Army of the Republic in Chicago



Rob Girardi

The Grand Army of the Republic was founded as a fraternal organization in Decatur, Illinois, in 1866 and survived well into the 20th Century. In its heyday it was both a premier social club for former soldiers and a political powerhouse that concerned itself with veterans' issues. The GAR grew to a peak membership of 409,000 veterans in 1890. It sponsored annual reunions on both local and national levels.

With the founding of the first post, the GAR became part of Chicago and the way that the Civil War would be remembered in the Windy City.

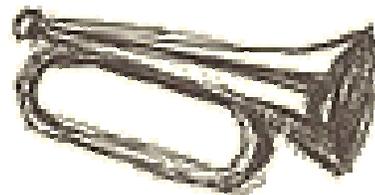
Chicago had as many as 34 active GAR posts at one time. Veterans of the war would be important players in the rise of the city. But time is a cruel master. Today, though there are many visible reminders of the grandeur and the impact of the Civil War generation, it is easy for most people to pass them by without giving it as much as a fleeting thought.

How did the GAR degenerate from being a part of everyday life to a historical afterthought? On November 3, 2017, Robert Girardi will answer that question and more.

Robert Girardi is a prolific historian of the Civil War. He has authored or co-authored many books on the subject, working with many of the best names in the trade. He is a detective with the Chicago Police Department, a member of numerous round tables, a ceaseless promoter of all things historical in the state, and a welcome friend to us at the Northern Illinois Civil War Round Table.

If you would like to join us for dinner with Robert Girardi at Sam's of Arlington restaurant, 1863 West Central Road, Arlington Heights, at 5:30 p.m. before the meeting on November 3, please contact me at kberlant@comcast.net or (847) 506-1807 by Wednesday, November 1. —

Wayne Rhine



Dues checks should be sent to Pat McCormick as soon as possible

Disaster at Little Big Horn

By Pat McCormick

Despite an extensive Civil War career, George Armstrong Custer will always be best-known for his disaster at Little Big Horn in 1876, which is usually viewed as a result of blunder on his part. On October 6, 2017, Don Sender took a close look at Custer's performance.

Sender began by relating how he became interested in Custer. At age 18 he read a newspaper article about Custer's purported relationship with Mon-nah-se-tah, a female Cheyenne refugee from the 1868 battle of the Washita. (Their relationship had been kept secret to protect the Custer family.) This small nugget grew into a lifelong interest in Custer for Sender.

Certainly, such lack of discipline was illustrated from the beginning of Custer's career, as his education at West Point included one of the worst conduct records in the academy's history. In Sender's words, the Civil War saved Custer; he graduated in 1861, at the outset of the conflict, and the need for trained officers overrode his considerable demerit total.

Sender then set up the 1876 debacle by a detailed look at Custer's career. Custer was a member of General George McClellan's staff in spring 1862, then moved on to the staff of cavalry general Alfred Pleasonton. He served with distinction through early summer 1863 (including the battle of Brandy Station). When three captains were jumped to brigadier just before the battle of Gettysburg, the 23-year-old Custer was one of them.

Now in command of a brigade of Michigan cavalry, the "boy general" chose a showy new uniform so he would be readily visible to his followers on the battlefield. He became famous for leading charges — first at Gettysburg, then in a short fight at Falling Waters during the pursuit of General Robert E. Lee's army to the Potomac. Despite his aggression, Custer was not reckless; he relied on solid scouting prior to his attacks.

As the Army of the Potomac's cavalry began peaking under Philip Sheridan in 1864, Custer was a key player — though at Trevilian Station he boldly charged into the Confederate rear, but then was surrounded and was barely able to cut his way out (what some refer to as his "first last stand"). Nonetheless he was a major contributor in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign and in the relentless pursuit of Lee to Appomattox in 1865 — so much so that Sheridan bought one of the surrender tables and presented it to Mrs. Custer, writing to her that "there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your gallant husband."



George Armstrong Custer

In the shrinking post-war Army, Custer became lieutenant colonel of the 7th Cavalry. He had one unusual qualification for campaigning on the Plains. Thanks to having a deaf cousin, he was adept at sign language and quickly picked up that used by the Plains Indians. But fighting

Indians was not like fighting Confederates, and Custer had a checkered performance in his first years on the Plains.

Sender set the stage for Little Big Horn by noting some troubling facts. First, the Army switched from seven-shot Spencer repeaters to single-shot Springfield carbines in 1873. (The Springfields turned out to be prone to jamming, and at Little Big Horn many of the Indians had repeating rifles, outgunning the soldiers.) Second, there was scandal in President Grant's administration, and Custer testified against the politicians, earning Grant's enmity. The colonel was thus now an enemy of the president and may have wished to be president himself. This desire may have contributed to his decision-making at Little Big Horn.

Sender pointed out several key factors in the Montana fight, chief among them the poor estimate of Indian strength: Custer thought they

might have only 800 men, instead of thousands. He could have had Gatling guns but refused them because they would have slowed him down. And he did not wait for Marcus Reno's fight to develop or for Frederick Benteen (who had the ammo train with him) to return from a scout, to

make his own attack. He thought surprise was more important. Outnumbered, divided, and often outgunned, Custer went down to immortality.

On behalf of the round table I would like to thank Don Sender for his examination of George Custer and Danny Kafka for the use of her notes.

November Events

November 10, Second Friday Lecture Series, Civil War Museum, Kenosha, WI. Allison Rainboth will discuss Quilts and the Civil War, noon. Quilts made during the Civil War era are evidence of the impact on daily living. Ms. Rainboth will show her collection of battered beauties from the period. Free program is sponsored by the Milwaukee Civil War Roundtable and the Iron Brigade Association. Information on all Civil War Museum programs is available at (262) 653-4140 or www.thecivilwarmuseum.org.

November 10, Chicago Civil War Round Table.

Tom Clemens will speak on Special Order 191 and the Maryland Campaign.

November 14, McHenry County Civil War Round Table. Doug Dammann will speak on Elmer Ellsworth and the U.S. Zouave Cadet.

November 17, Salt Creek Civil War Round Table. Don White will speak on Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address.

Eisenhower Library Discussion

The Civil War discussion group at the Eisenhower Library, 4613 North Oketo Avenue, Harwood Heights, meets on the first Saturday of the month from 10:00 until 11:30 a.m. On November 4 the group will discuss the start of the Chickamauga campaign on September 18, 1863.

Dues Are Due

Dues forms and checks should be sent to assistant treasurer Pat McCormick, 1444 North Lee Boulevard, Berkeley, Illinois 60163-1314. Dues are \$55 family, \$45 individual, and \$5 student. A sustaining membership is any payment over the normal rates. Deduct \$5 if you receive the newsletter by e-mail.

drum roll, November 2017

November Saturday Discussion

All members and guests are invited to participate in the session to be held at the Barrington Area Library on Saturday, November 16, 2017, from 10:00 a.m. until noon. The discussion topic was not available at newsletter press time.

These discussions are generally held on the third Saturday of the month from November through June. They are held to generate and foster a free exchange of ideas on Civil War events.

Women's Civil War Book Club

The Civil War book club for women will meet at 2 p.m., on November 26 at the home of Denise Limburg. The book to be discussed is *Chain of Thunder* by Jeff Shaara. Anyone interested in joining the group should contact Denise Limburg at (847) 382-1022 or dlimburg@prodigy.net or Mary Banks at zeller1@comcast.net or (847) 497-3149.

Get Involved

All members are encouraged to participate in all activities of the Northern Illinois Civil War Round Table. There are a number of ways for members to serve the organization, for example, as an officer, trustee, committee member, or speaker. Anyone who would like to get more involved in these activities may contact President Wayne Rhine or any other current officer or past president.

To Contribute to the Drum Roll

All members are welcome to contribute to the newsletter. If you have information to share, contact Sally Smith, 328 Eastern Avenue, Barrington, Illinois 60010, telephone (847) 381-6486, or e-mail drum_roll4@juno.com.



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Book Raffle	Charles Banks
Newsletter Editor	Sally Smith

October Raffle

The lucky winners of the October raffle were Mark Ostrand, who won *Out Flew the Sabres: The Battle of Brandy Station, June 9, 1863* by Eric J. Wittenberg and Daniel T. Davis, donated by Charlie Banks; Alfred Kitch, who won *Touring the Carolinas' Civil War Sites: The Official Guide to the Civil War Discovery Trail* by Clint Johnson; Paul Wydra, who won *Civil War Fathers: Sons of the Civil War in World War II*, edited by Tim Pletkovich; David Noe, who won *The Battle of Bentonville* by Weymouth T. Jordan; Aubrey Neville, who won *The Blue and the Gray* by Henry Steele Commager; and Jerry Allen, who won *The Campaign of Chancellorsville* by Theodore Ayrauld Dodge.

Congratulations to the winners and sincere thanks to the donors.

2017–2018 Speakers

November 3	Robert Girardi	The Rise and Fall of the Grand Army of the Republic in Chicago
December 1	Pat McCormick	Irish Brigade
January 5	Wayne Rhine	Cushing Brothers



To learn more about the Northern Illinois Civil War Round Table
visit our website at www.northernilcwr.org